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ABSTRACT

Basic principles and methods of ethnographic research are outlined for students who may wish to undertake this form of qualitative research. Ethnographic research is defined as a form of study based on observation of human action, discourse, and self-perception, and is suggested as an appropriate form of research when experimental research is inappropriate, and when exactitude is not needed. Four steps in the research process are outlined: pre-planning (choosing a place or population, determining limitations and possible problems, investigating feasibility, making a formal research proposal, gathering research tools); gaining access and getting help (protecting human subjects, convincing "gatekeepers" to allow access, making use of a cooperative individual); observation (choosing a role, taking and processing field notes, interviewing the observed); and follow-up (analyzing notes, developing concepts, interpreting and evaluating, writing and publishing results). Considerations in conducting each of these stages are discussed. Two examples of research projects are used as illustration: a study in which three college students research restaurant eating habits, and one in which a professional researcher lives within a community to examine household division of labor. Contains 10 references. (MSE)

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Chapter 8

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Students as Ethnographers

Linda Donan

In a busy Osaka fast food restaurant at lunch time, three Japanese junior college students surreptitiously position themselves to watch a foreign couple eating. One student takes note of how often the woman uses her napkin compared to the man; another student counts the times the two customers reach across the narrow table to touch each other during their conversation; and the third student uses two stopwatches, a pencil, and paper to record how much time the couple spend in verbal exchange and in silence. As soon as the couple finishes their lunch, the students select an entering Japanese couple who are apparently about the same age as the foreign couple, and set up to resume their surreptitious observation.

Meanwhile, in Mie prefecture, an American researcher has arrived at a small fishing village. He is being formally introduced to the mayor by a go-between who is also a researcher at a respected Japanese University. Later, the mayor will urge various village members to allow the researcher to live for extended periods in their homes. After a year or more, the researcher will have sufficiently ensconced himself into the village life, to report on the modern "house-husband" role attributed to the partners of traditional *ama* (female pearl divers).

Both the professional researcher, dedicating a year or more of his life, and the college students giving up their lunch hour, are practising ethnographic research.

Ethnography

The word ethnography is formed from the two Greek words "ethnos" (tribe or nation) and "graphos" (something written). Both the researcher and the college students are studying members of a tribe or nation. Both the professional researcher with his suitcase full of notebooks, cassette tape recorders, word pro-

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cessor, video, and time-lapse cameras; and the students with their simple timers, notebooks, and pencils are doing their ethnographic study by writing something down or recording what they observe.

The ethnographer, Clifford Geertz (1973) noted that it is the act of inscription which transforms momentary events into accounts that can be reconsulted.

If anyone should ever wish to know who washes the dishes in the home of the *ama*, or if anyone wants a glimpse at the eating habits of foreigners in fast food restaurants in Japan, they can consult a written report.

Miles and Huberman (1984) pointed to the use of ethnography in providing rich descriptions of local communities. The pearl diving village described above is a local context chosen for its unusual characteristics. For the purpose of cross-cultural or comparative research, however, a field such as the fast food restaurant selected by the college students is richer because people of many cultures can be found performing the same ritual—eating their hamburgers.

Frey (1988) contrasted the subjectivity of ethnography with the objectivity of fact finding. Although there are tools of measurement used in both of the examples described above, the most important tools are the observers themselves. The ethnographic investigator looks at a subject that they are ideally equipped to understand, namely, human beings. Observing actions, listening to discourses, and in longer studies discussing the subjects' perceptions of themselves are the primary ways that data is gathered for ethnographic research.

Ethnographers also differ from experimental researchers in their relationship to the actions they observe. While the latter generally attempt to maintain a personal distance from the observation, ethnographers often interact closely with their subjects or with the subjects' environment. Lindlof (1988) extended this notion of involvement to include ethnographic descriptions that require the richness of the observers' experience in the field to give fullness to the situation being described.

Why Choose Ethnography?

Experiments, or other forms of quantitative research, are useful when working with numerically measurable data under controlled conditions. They provide excellent techniques for getting very specific information. They are not, however, always appropriate for working with human subjects. People often act in complex and unexpected ways that are beyond the parameters of an experimental hypothesis. Experimental exactitude, which might require controlled conditions, tends to make people behave self-consciously or unnaturally.

Ethnographers and other qualitative researchers try to get a wider view. They trade specificity and measurability for the experiential depth of watching what people do in their normal activities in their normal life spaces.

Qualitative and quantitative research are often viewed as polar opposites appropriate for different tasks or different departmental paradigms (i.e., quanti-

tative research for the hard sciences and qualitative research for the social sciences). It is possible that some types of exploration may best be carried out through a series of research strategies beginning with ethnographic research and progressing through to systematic quantitative studies. The choice to be an ethnographer rather than an experimental researcher can also involve issues of personal conviction based on personality traits, attitudes, and values.

What are the Steps of Ethnography?

Careful planning and procedures can help to insure a positive outcome to ethnographic studies. Some steps you may want to consider are:

1. Preplanning
   (a) Choosing a study place (field) or subject (tribe).
   (b) Determining limitations and possible problems.
   (c) Casing the scene for feasibility and suitability.
   (d) Making your formal research proposal.
   (e) Gathering tools and arranging logistics.
2. Getting in and getting help
   (a) Protecting human subjects.
   (b) Convincing gatekeepers to allow access.
   (c) Making use of a "friendly native."
3. The actual observation
   (a) Choosing a role.
   (b) Taking field notes and processing them.
   (c) Interviewing the observed.
4. Follow-up
   (a) Analyzing your notes.
   (b) Developing concepts.
   (c) Interpreting and evaluating.
   (d) Writing up and publishing results.

The above list is not to be considered as an inflexible procedure, but rather as a set of useful choices. Each ethnographer must follow the steps that prove successful—through trial and error—with their own subjects, in their own fields.

1. Pre-planning considerations

(a) *Choosing a study place (field) or subject (tribe).* Determining which cultures and which subjects to study is often based on personal interest and opportunity. The Mie researcher described earlier in this paper, came from a society where shared household duties is a modern norm to study this marginal phenomena in a society where household roles are usually divided between the sexes. For the college students a sentence in an English textbook about the

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fastidious eating habits of Japanese people prompted their study. Their teacher had read earlier research results comparing touching customs in various cultures and had suggested that research question to them.

Having decided on the subjects, one must then choose the field or place of observation. For college students, unable to travel abroad, the local fast food restaurant provided an accessible site for ethnographic research. However, if foreign restaurant-goers never entered that restaurant then it obviously could not be chosen as a field of research. If lighting was low, tables were curtained off, or if the students could not get a table they would have had observation difficulties.

(b) *Determining limitations and possible problems*. The tribe and field one chooses to study will produce unique problems that must be considered.

The researcher's own limitations must also be considered. The Mie researcher had considered his own gender, his height, his clothing, and obvious foreignness and taken into account how those factors may effect his interaction with the subjects. He had prepared himself by studying the Japanese language, but had also taken into account his understanding of Japanese culture and potential ethnocentrism or prejudices that might color his observations. Likewise, his own positive attitudes towards males doing housework needed to be seen as a possible problem that might affect his findings.

The college students' inexperience at research was compensated for by the simple numeric techniques they chose. Nevertheless, one of the students revealed the effects of ethnocentrism on observation when testing her hypothesis that the Japanese subjects would use their napkins more often than the foreign subjects. She had equated napkin use with a personal value of cleanliness. Her results, however, contradicted her hypothesis, a fact which she found so personally and emotionally upsetting that she re-did the observation several times. Her co-researchers had to ask her to be silent in order to prevent her incredulous and angry remarks being overheard by the subjects under observation.

(c) *Casing the scene for feasibility and suitability*. The next step, casing the scene, does not necessarily start at the scene. If at all possible, ethnographers should consult the literature for previous or on-going studies of their subjects, and consider the recommendations of experienced people before they visit the field. A researcher studying African tribes was once given the unexpected advice, by an experienced ethnographer, to carry a stick to ward-off dog attacks (Saniek, 1990).

Colleagues of the Mie researcher had told him of the *ama* and their domestic arrangements, and he had read anecdotal reports as well as Japanese research studies. He also read about mainstream Japanese attitudes towards housework, and discussed the issues involved with his Japanese acquaintances. The college students had discovered that only the one of them that was sitting nearest the table under observation could hear well enough over the noise to be certain whether the subjects were speaking or not. They realised, however, that they could sometimes watch the subjects' lips either directly or reflected in a nearby wall mirror.

(d) *Making your formal research proposal.* For many ethnographers, the next task involves setting up a formal research structure. The Mie researcher had to submit a research proposal to get time off from his university teaching. He also had to convince the funding board of his rationale for the study. The college students had received their teacher's verbal approval of their project, and they had arranged a meeting time and decided who would do which part of the observation.

(e) *Gathering tools and arranging logistics.* Equipment needs can also be determined and prepared in advance. Traditionally, an ethnographer's tools have included two eyes, notebook, and a pencil. Recently, recording and counting devices have aided observation, but one should be careful to take into the field only those tools that can be handled easily while focusing attention on the subjects.

If possible, the observer should conduct a pilot study or informal visit to a proposed site to determine such things as the best time to conduct the observation, and the best vantage point. Earlier studies in Mie by Japanese anthropologists focusing on the *ama* had prepared the villagers for the inconveniences of tape recorders and strangers in their homes. For the student observers, the lunch hour rush proved an ideal time to observe subjects from a well centered table that afforded a view of all other tables.

2. Getting in and getting help

(a) *Protecting human subjects.* Care must be taken that the subjects of ethnographic research be allowed to go about their natural lives without feeling imposed upon by the observation process.

In America, where experimental studies in bygone decades allowed researchers to shock their subjects with electrodes, strict measures are now in place to protect human research subjects. The American researcher, therefore, had to fill out legal documents to be considered by a board in charge of the safety and happiness of human research subjects. Throughout his stay, he had to ask again and again if people minded him sitting in on their daily activities, and request permission for all his intrusions including the use of tape recorders and video cameras. Any slight hesitancy or protest on the part of his subjects required him to retract and wait until the people were more comfortable with his presence, or to withdraw to another home.

No such standards were set for the students in Japan. Their teacher did suggestion that the content of private conversations not be recorded, and in another case from the same class the teacher suggested that the interviewed foreigner not be approached for a "date."

(b) *Convincing gatekeepers to allow access.* Getting into the research field often requires admission by a "gatekeeper." The Mie researcher was introduced by a prominent professor affiliated with Tokyo University. The Mayor also worked on his behalf securing the confidence of local people. These go-betweens helped to smooth the way for the study. The students could have asked for permission

from the restaurant's employees and manager but chose to remain incognito—even to their gatekeepers—and to rely on the fact that one of them was a former employee to get them out of any trouble if it arose.

(c) *Making use of a "friendly native."* Japanese people are well aware of the uses of go-betweens as gatekeepers and can accept the need for a "friendly native" to help with translating not only the language of the subjects but also the culture. Especially in observing a culture or sub-culture other than one's own, the help of a friendly native can save the researcher from errors such as that of the ethnographer, Margaret Meade (Howard, 1984). Meade did not find out until years later that the subjects of her south sea island research had been "pulling her leg" with their sexual stories because she seemed to enjoy such tales. She did not have a friendly native who was frank enough with her to explain that her research was being skewed by the imaginative stories that they thought would please her.

3. The Observation

(a) *Choosing a role.* Ethnographic researchers must choose a role to play in the field. Some possible roles are: complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer. The college students pretending to be customers and hiding their pencils behind their lunch were aiming at the complete participant role. This role can be particularly effective in that subjects are usually unaware of being observed. It is also effective in that the researcher shares the experience of the subjects, and knows, for instance, if the greasiness of the fries makes one want to use a napkin or if the noise level of the restaurant discourages conversation.

The work of Trujillo and Dionisopoulos (1987) observing policemen's use of "labeling" and "talking tough" by riding along with them in the front seats of patrol cars is an example of participant-as-observer. They were known to be conducting research and were not wearing police uniforms. They were not expected to take an active part in arrests, and could completely withdraw from dangerous situations. They negotiated a space to cohabit, and the police never expected them—nor would allow them—to "face the heat."

Participant-as-observer was also the role chosen by the Mie researcher. He could not pass as a Japanese nor become a second house-husband in the situation. Although he hoped to be granted the comfort of being included in the family over time, he remained aware of the limitations of his identity as a guest, and maintained an awareness of his obtrusiveness.

An example of the observer-as-participant role is the interview. In this situation, the researcher is on the scene for a brief period and clearly playing the role of observer. Their clipboard is their badge that allows them to stop complete strangers on the street and take up their time with questions. Researchers who do not make their role clear, for instance during random street interviews, might receive hostile reactions, be regarded as crazy, or even be reported to police.

To be a complete observer, in other words to see and not take part or be seen, is possible these days with the use of cameras and tape recorders. Many social scientists dislike this method of gathering data as it can stretch the rules of privacy and it does not allow the researcher enough contact with his or her subject. Clearly, the categories are not simple or definite but rather there is a spectrum of possibilities. The Mie researcher may have pitched in and washed dishes with his house-husband hosts, and the students I am sure took some sips of their shakes and bites of their hamburgers.

(b) *Taking field notes and processing them.* Taking field notes is the heart of ethnography. Questionnaires and taped interviews can be quite comfortable tools for researchers interacting in a culture and language that is not their own. The class of the Japanese college students in the above-mentioned class in Osaka had learned that neither of these tools were as effective as observation, for their particular questions. A questionnaire with a question such as, "How often do you use a napkin when you eat?" elicited responses ranging from nervous and perhaps less than honest "very often" replies to the more honest but less helpful "I don't know, I don't count."

Field notes are ideally massive and detailed notes taken while the observation is in process or at the first available free moment unobserved in the case of complete participants or participant-observers. A detailed observation in the Mie village might be something like:

> 5:08, Wednesday morning, week 23, the Tanaka husband enters the kitchen from the bedroom barefoot in his wrinkled pyjama bottoms. He is the first person to leave the bedroom this morning. He crosses the floor in three shuffling steps, turns on the rice cooker sitting on the table with a press on a single lever and yawns widely. Husband notices I am awake and smiles widely. Says "It's early, isn't it." I agree with a nod. Husband scratches self in the right ribs. Husband nods four deep nods, bows in my direction, crosses the kitchen to the bedroom door and apparently returns to bed.

Such detailed notes might be accompanied by a floor plan of the Tanaka kitchen. They might be full of abbreviations such as "TH" for Tanaka Husband, "4 n, 1 db" for four nods and one deep bow. Also, good field notes contain parenthetical-notes such as (wide-smile appears to be one of discomfort rather than friendly recognition), (all family members practice shuffling steps when anyone in the house is presumed to be asleep), (right ribs seem to be the preferred spot of self-scratching of TH whereas left ribs seem to be the preferred spot of nervous self-comforting of Tanaka son, daughter, and visiting cousin).

The teacher of the Osaka college students had difficulty teaching her students to differentiate between true observations and conjectures, a problem which often resulted in incomplete notes. Students had to be shown again and again to place parentheses around their own opinions and to keep them separate and treat them

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differently from the observed data. "He wiped his hands on his pants" is observation, whereas "He is unclean" is parenthetical opinion. Also, parenthetical statements had to be expanded back into observations. The observer wrote, "She was happy when he touched her hand," to which the teacher asked, "How exactly did you know she was happy? Did she smile? Did she lean forward? Did her eyes narrow or widen? Did her breathing or facial coloring change? Did she say, 'I am happy?'" Ethnographic observation, like all skills, improves with practice.

Tape recorders and video cameras are thought by some to have eased the necessity for detailed field notes. But there are fields of study which lack both available electricity or a supply of batteries for outdoor observers, and there are fields where movement, action, concealment, and privacy make these devices too unwieldy. Even when a video-camera has been in place, however, the observer's field notes are necessary. The human neck swivels to catch the smallest peripheral action, the human eye moves to change focus much more reactively with the human event than a camera on a tripod. The discomfort that subjects feel when under the camera's eye and how that effects the naturalness of their behaviors is also an important consideration.

One teacher studying classroom action in Nagoya gets around the problem of subject awkwardness by bringing two video cameras to class from the beginning of the semester. Students are asked to ham-up their self introductions, which are videotaped. Toward the end of the collegiate year, apparently, the students are so desensitized to the camera's presence that the teacher can zoom-in on the most private of pairwork conversations with impunity.

During fieldwork, the Mie researcher often perused his field notes to see if some patterns of behavior or communication where forming or if some interesting and unusual paths of inquiry have been overlooked. In the case of the shorter studies, a researchers can use their field notes to find points worthy of a further study or areas they have neglected to complete in the current study.

4. Follow-Up

Evans-Pritchard (1951), who did anthropological studies in foreign countries such as Sudan under the most rustic and difficult of conditions in the 1950s, felt that the most difficult aspect of ethnographic study was writing-up the notes. Certainly injuries, illnesses, and other discomforts are part of the quality of being in the field, but it is in the writing-up of field notes that real mental difficulties arise. Not only is it a gargantuan task, but unlike the social task of being out and observing your subjects, it is a lonely one usually spent at a desk with your field note journals piled around your elbows. One cannot merely type it up and produce a treatise on what happened and then what happened next. To make field notes readable the researcher must dig through the mountains of notes or tape recordings, mine out the valuable insights, and present them in a natural setting. The "mining tools" are the researcher's own deep understanding of the observed tribe.

Are There Special Considerations for Ethnography in Japan?

If you are not a native Japanese, observing Japanese subjects has a possible problem with cultural misunderstanding and thus misinterpretation in the research. Even if you are fluent in the Japanese language, there may be some cases where interviews or overheard conversations are not clear to you. So much of the fashion and customs of my own country, the USA, can be seen here in the large and modern cities of Japan that it is easy to forget that they are a facade over a nation that is unique in values, attitudes, and heritage. I believe it may actually be easier for an ethnographer working in a mountain village in Papua New Guinea to keep in mind the basic rule of "Watch and listen carefully, for you are a stranger here and anything and everything is important!" In Japan, where things seem to be easy to understand and one does not need to carry a big stick to fend off dogs, the observer may become less cautious than an ethnographer must be. Too many important points may be missed.

Here, too, one must make even greater efforts to ensure that a friendly native keeps an eye on how your observations are interpreted. Many Japanese people, however, who are friendly enough to help with your ethnography will not be culturally disposed to frankly criticize your mistakes or misunderstandings.

There are, also, specific ethical considerations in this field. Many foreigners in Japan are here as English teachers and using your students as reporters and research-aids is an understandable choice. But, one must question whether taking class-time to teach ethnography techniques and to process interviews and observation data is an appropriate use of English study time. The students in the Osaka example above had signed up, not for a regular English conversation course, but for a special course titled "Intercultural Communications and Research."

Japan does not, apparently, have laws concerning privacy and protection of humans in experimental studies. Without the rigour of a review board, you must be more than conscientious in the way you set up, practice, and later publish your research. The ethnographer works with people, and must never forget that people can be harmed.

Conclusion

There are just about as many ethnographic styles of research as there are ethnographers, and one must choose a method and refine it in the field to fit one's own nature and circumstances. All expatriates in Japan and their students may really find it fun to look around them and see all that is to be seen in this tribe. The follow-up publishing of one's ethnography in computer postings, professional journals (see Appendix), or in film documentaries must be done with ethical considerations but it can be fun as well.

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Appendix: *Some Journals that Publish Ethnographic Studies*

Anthropology/Sociology	Communication	Education, Language
American Anthropologist	*Communication Theory*	*Anthropology and Education Quarterly*
American Ethnologist	*Critical Studies in Mass Comm.*	*Discourse Processes*
Anthropological Quarterly	*Cultural Studies*	*International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Ed.*
Cultural Anthropology	*European Journal of Comm.*	*International Journal of Sociology of Language*
Current Anthropology	*Journal of Comm. Inquiry*	*Language in Society*
Ethnology	*Media, Culture & Society*	*Public Culture*
Family Process	*Research on Language & Social Interaction*	
Human Studies	*Semiotica*	
Journal of Contemporary Ethnography	*Signs*	
Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior	*Studies in Visual Comm.*	
Journal of Applied Anthr.	*Symbolic Interaction*	
Man	*Text & Performance Quarterly*	
Qualitative Sociology		
Sociological Quarterly		